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Review of "Return to Reason"

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Book Review

Return to Reason, Stephen Toulmin. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). 243 pages. Index and Notes. ISBN: 0-674-00495-7

Stephen Toulmin argues that after the seventeenth century rationality was rendered not only distinct but separate from reasonableness, despite the intimate connection these ideas enjoyed in antiquity and the perversity of tearing them asunder. Rationality he associates with the theoretical, the scientific, the deductive and the certain; reasonableness with narrative, rhetoric, the historically situated and the uncertain. Rationality demands proof; to be reasonable is to make sense. And while Toulmin thinks the damage done by placing undue emphasis on theoretical and unhistorical deductive thinking has been partly undone in our post-modern day, “even now,” Toulmin asserts, “it takes a sophisticated analysis to convince many behavioral scientists that their theories” are not purely rational in the outdated sense. We must learn to live, he argues, with uncertainty and yet restore faith in the commonsense ways of thinking involved in, among other things, practical experience, the exercise of manual skills and the formation of ideals. Professor Toulmin is a self-identified multi-disciplinary “odd duck” who comments on an expansive range of topics that sometimes gives his book a rambling quality, but perhaps he is simply practicing what he preaches and letting his essay resemble less the formal French garden and more the relaxed and casual English variety he so much admires.

> This alleged difference between the English and French styles of garden, he at one point suggests, reverberates with the difference between French (think Descartes) and English (Locke) styles of thought: “on one side soaring reflection, on the other pedestrian observation,” differences of a kind one finds also in their distinct poetic style and vision (Racine vs. Shakespeare), not to mention in their laws and legal theory. Just as one might be thinking of counterexamples, Professor Toulmin demurs that he is not making a “general contrast between countries” but between priorities arising from differences between upper-class life in the two countries. Still, is it reasonable to speak in these generalities when one is at pains to praise quotidian observation and experience as against “soaring reflection”? Toulmin is expert at forging connections among items in disparate domains, but occasionally his remarks seem glib and involve an excessive reaching. On the other hand he deliberately paints with a broad brush because he wants to portray vast regions of the historical and intellectual landscape in order to show how and why we must “reestablish the proper balance between Theory and Practice, Logic and Rhetoric, Rationality and Reasonableness” (13).
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> From antiquity on narratives of all sorts were given their due, but in the seventeenth century an imbalance developed between “the reasonableness of narratives and the rigor of formal proofs,” a one-sidedness that became most lopsided in the last century, especially in the philosophy of science. Toulmin sometimes refers to the opposing ends of this teeter-totter as *formal proof* and

substantial argumentation, both of which types of thinking he traces as far back as Plato, who reveled in mathematical proofs, on the one side, yet was also responsible for vivid portrayal of the trial of Socrates in which we find examples of what Toulmin thinks philosophers dismiss as mere rhetoric. In his much earlier book, *The Uses of Argument*, Toulmin had argued that logic and rhetoric are compatible despite what he thinks is their central difference: rhetoric is situational while logic is purely intellectual. The "situational" contrasts with the contextual, for Toulmin understands context as a kind of whole/part relation, as for example in "this passage from Toulmin's book was quoted out of context," while "desituated" refers to "the way in which a lexical item relates to the -- largely non-linguistic -- situation in which it functions." Rhetoric and casuistry, unlike logic, situate thought in its historical setting, taking into account rival interpretations, its temporal setting and possible ambiguities in its expression, all factors necessary for appreciating Socrates' argumentation before a jury. To consider Socrates' argument from the point of view of Rationality alone, Toulmin claims, is to focus exclusively on isolated propositions, heedless of the situation in which they occur, and hence to omit what is crucial about them.

Toulmin traces this imbalance between reason and rationality or rhetoric and logic through the centuries, showing how it has affected the invention of disciplines and in particular how it has had an especially corrupting effect on Economics, a social science whose practitioners tried too hard to be "Newtons of social theory," unduly influenced by what Toulmin identifies as the "quest for Cosmic Stability" in physics which too often rendered Economics nearly barren of practical relevance. This tendency to rely on pure theory Toulmin ascribes in part to the "Dream of an Exact Language," the yearning for a perfect language that could facilitate understanding and agreement across all boundaries, an ideal which in philosophy begins with Plato's *Cratylus* and leads through Leibniz to the work of Frege and Russell in the early part of the last century, linking also to the religious wars and cosmological uncertainties of the seventeenth century and to the confusing multicultural globalism of our day.

The elitist perception of genuine science as natural science and as largely a matter of method lashes economics to physics by virtue of the notion that Scientific Method is the *sine qua non* of rationality, and in one chapter Toulmin dismantles this notion and tries also to construct an argument showing why objectivity cannot be thought of as value-free scientific detachment and why there is no one method appropriate to the social sciences. Although, as he concedes, these ideas are no longer radical, social scientists are still, he contends, often guilty of a sort of elitism that separates scientists from their human subjects, treating them too much like the inanimate objects investigated in the so-called "hard sciences." In clinical practices such as we find in medicine, method and theory that focus on what is generally true should give way to attention to particulars and to practical rather than theoretical reason. Accordingly, Toulmin details recent social history to explain the current interest in medical and other professional "applied" ethics and in efforts to humanize clinical practice.

Toulmin takes issue with theorists such as Alasdair McIntyre who believe we cannot attain a "well-founded moral position in any practical situation unless we are committed to some systematic theoretical position," arguing that practitioners hold no such view and moreover get little assistance in coping with practical ethical issues on the ground from the lofty moral theories floated in the last century. He cites the work of William Gass, the novelist and philosopher, as an example of a helpful effort to show through narrative that while some cases are morally transparent others are unclear,

and most importantly that unclear cases are not resolved by applying moral theory or principles. One might be reminded of here of Bernard Williams' remark that the man who wonders whether some principle justifies saving his drowning wife instead of a stranger asks one too many questions. One might also think of Martha Nussbaum's essays on philosophy and literature which, like Williams' work, raise important questions about the standing of general principles in moral thought, even if Toulmin discusses neither of these philosophers in this book, not to mention Charles Taylor or the recent work of Richard Posner who would agree with Toulmin that moral theory "is not a foundation on which we can safely construct Practice."

Academic specialization into disciplines, though not without its practical merit, also comes under fire in this book, and Toulmin compares distress in the academy with institutional turmoil in religion, though to what end it is not altogether clear except that in both cases there is tension between "disciplinary and interdisciplinary aspects of our thought." Academic disciplines are arenas of thought in which agreement can be expected and reached, just as religious denominations and sects foster and depend upon unanimity of belief. Specialization brought with it an efficient and intensifying division of labor but also the risk that the rigor flowing from it "might degenerate into rigidity" and lead to the "bracketing off" or marginalizing of important areas of thought such as ethics that involve untidy matters of value. Perhaps more importantly, specialists are liable to suppose, Toulmin thinks, that they are equipped to know by virtue of their disciplinary specialization what things are salient or significant in making policy decisions or in helping to shape social experiments that affect large numbers of people. Like religious sects, academic disciplines can foster insularity. He recounts a number of vignettes meant to show that specialists can be blinkered and narrow-minded precisely because they have a specialist way of viewing things; in academic departments of economics the twentieth century American focus on pure theory is, Toulmin believes, a glaring case in point even if also an example of recent progress, since he believes interdisciplinarity is coming to the fore in this domain.

The imbalance between reasonableness and rationality goes back a long way, perhaps most significantly in Toulmin's view to the Westphalian System of sovereign states established after the Thirty Years War, an ideological package comprising "Absolute Sovereignty, Established Religion, and Logical Demonstration" which had in common top-down political, ecclesiastical and academic oligarchic power and which formed a "single package . . . so that questioning any one of its components was regarded as attacking them all." The book closes with an account of the demise of this system and an attempt to answer the question, "How can the balance between rationality and reasonableness be restored?" The answer Toulmin proposes principally involves pragmatism and skepticism and some beliefs about recent intellectual history many readers may find as uncertain as the world unclouded by theory dreamed of in Toulmin's philosophy.

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